

Benefits of Project Based Curriculum in the Social Emotional Supports Setting

Parker Sisty, Federation Representative at Manzano HS, Special Education Teacher
Albuquerque Teachers Federation, AFT Local #1420

Research Question

How can Project Based Curriculum support the needs of students in a Social Emotional Supports classroom?

Rationale

Teaching in the Social Emotional Support setting (SESS1), also known as behavioral disorder (BD) or Emotional disturbance (ED) in some places, has brought many things to light when it comes to my students. The students I support are not what are thought of as traditional students. They are special, different, and challenged in various ways.

The students I support have challenges that are difficult to understand for most people and have survived traumas in their lives that have caused them to experience the educational system in a different way than most. Traditional learning methods have typically not been the most successful for these students and a different approach is needed. During the first couple of years working with these students, I started to realize that the standard approach was not going to work as they had a difficult time staying focused on the material, concentrating in class, staying on task and managing their behaviors. These are some of the reasons that these students ended up in my class in the first place. Difficulty staying on task and not understanding the material being taught caused many of the students I teach to have emotional or behavioral outbursts in previous classes that led to their placement in my classroom.

I knew that something different needed to happen. Toward the end of my 2nd year, I decided to add more hands-on elements to my classes. Doing this completely changed the whole dynamic of my classroom. The addition of hands-on project-based learning reduced challenging behaviors, increased time on task, and led to overall student focus and genuine interest in the material. The hands-on approach to learning allowed these students to look at education and learning from a different perspective. These are the reasons that I started looking into a project-based approach in the classroom.

Literature Review

“Project-based learning increases team working and cooperative learning skills prompting heretofore reluctant and disengaged students (e.g., low-achieving students) to become motivated and engaged learners” (Thomas, 2000, p. 22). Westwood (2006) points out that projects promote meaningful learning, connecting new learning to student’s past experience and prior knowledge. They increase self-direction and motivation. Since students are responsible for their own learning, they utilize various modes of communication and presentation (multi-sensory approach) which may be quite helpful for pupils with learning difficulties. Project-based learning is also an inclusive approach, in that all learners can participate to the best of their ability.

Trying to research project-based learning in my particular setting turned up no results. Because of this, I looked at my experiences since starting this emphasis in my classroom and I have definitely found that behaviors, anxiety, and emotional outbursts in the classroom have declined dramatically as students appear to feel more comfortable and confident in the educational environment. Students have become more engaged in class discussions as well as the material being covered. The ability to have a tactile experience with the material, freedom and independence with their education and more of an opportunity to express themselves in a creative way appears to have really made a solid and positive impact on the students. I fully plan to continue project-based learning in the classroom while continually adapting projects to the needs of the students as those needs and students change.

Study Design and Data Analysis

In the first full year of committing to project-based learning, we had a near 60% decrease from the year before in office referrals and behavioral issues. I found that students were more engaged with their work and their understanding seemed to improve. The students really seemed to enjoy the projects and wanted to come to class because they knew it was going to be different and more interesting than their previous experiences with education.

Through a survey conducted with my students, I learned that project-based learning has increased their excitement about school and overall learning. The students I work with gave responses to the question, “What do you feel the benefits of project-based learning in our classroom have been for you?”. The answers to this question were: “It doesn’t feel like education”, “we have more control over our education”, “easier to understand, less stress, more time”, “more control over our education”, “class and assignments are more interesting”, “more fun”, “Presentations can be nerve wracking, but my confidence has improved”, “my time management has improved”, “more interested in school”, “I’m learning at my own pace”, “we are learning to do our own research and become more self-reliant”, “I feel more prepared for graduation and handling a job after high school”.

I also reached out to a couple former students to ask the same question. The students that I reached out to (here I am paraphrasing as they had similar responses when I spoke with them) said the skills they learned in class helped prepare them for real world jobs by learning how to manage their time effectively and take initiative when at work so that their boss was not having to constantly assign them a new task. Both of these students learned how to be self-reliant self-starters and creative problem solvers as a result of project-based learning.

Recommendations

I believe that some model of project-based learning should be implemented in SESS programs across the district in some form, either partially or a total commitment. The students we work with get excited about new projects and we often will get their feedback when deciding on the subject matter for a potential new project which promotes buy-in. My co-teacher and I have seen great success in our students since adopting a project-based format for our classroom. The students appear to be happier in class and more motivated to participate in their own education. There are several websites with amazing ideas for project-based assignments that have everything included, from vocabulary to assessment. One of the sites we used getting started was

<https://www.teachengineering.org/>.

References

Thomas, J. W. (2000). A review of Research on Project-Based Learning, Ph.D. thesis, San Rafael, California, USA, available at <http://www.autodesk.com/faoundation>.

Westwood, P. (2006). Teaching and learning difficulties: cross-curricular perspectives, Camberwell, Vic.: ACER. Press.